



## Wildflowers: Timeless Texas Beauty

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that the “earth laughs in flowers.” If that is true, springtime in Texas must be the happiest place on earth.

Texas is home to more than 5,000 species of native wildflowers and plants. Much of Texas got significant rain over the winter, so we should start seeing an explosion of blooms as early as mid-March.

The Texas Department of Transportation tends about 800,000 acres of roadside, and wildflowers will cover much of it in March, April and May. Texas Escapes magazine has excellent ideas for driving tours of prime wildflower areas.

You can visit various Texas hamlets named in honor of our wildflower glory, such as Primrose, Flora, Bloomfield, Flowery Mountain and Shooting Star.

Desert marigolds and cacti will bloom in the Big Bend, and both Indian paintbrush and winecups will peak out from native grasses in Central Texas. Lantana will thrive in the heat of our Texas summer, and children will tickle their noses with pink buttercups.

Golden yellow coreopsis—once stuffed into mattresses by early settlers to ward off ticks and fleas—will carpet fields and roadsides. Lemonmint, once used to brew cough medicine, will flourish through much of the state, attracting bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

Later this month, the Dogwood festivals in East Texas will be attracting visitors. In April, thousands of tourists will tramp down bluebonnet trails in Central Texas. By mid-May, the annual Cherokee Rose Festival near Gilmer will provide the rural countryside with spectacular vistas of wild roses.

We should never take these glorious natural and native wonders for granted. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at the University of Texas at Austin is helping make sure we don't.

Last November, the Houston Endowment foundation provided a \$200,000 grant to the Wildflower Center to support its part in the “Millennium Seed Bank Project,” a \$120 million global plant conservation effort developed by the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, Great Britain.

The Wildflower Center is one of five American non-profit organizations participating in a global seed conservation effort. Its role is to collect 10,000 to 20,000 seeds from most of the state's native wildflowers and plants.

Any number of factors—a hurricane, soil contamination, overdevelopment and “over-collection” by plant enthusiasts or nurseries—can wipe out a plant species. This project will ensure the plants can be restored.

With the Houston Endowment grant, the Wildflower Center will gather and conserve seeds of native plants from an 8,000-square-mile region in the Houston area and East Texas, which contain nearly 70 percent of all native Texas plants.

Preserving all plants is the goal, but native Texan seeds with a “restoration value” are first among equals in their importance to the conservation effort. For instance, the native persimmon tree is a food source. The purple coneflower, from which Echinacea is produced, has a medicinal value.

We are all grateful to the researchers and volunteers from the Wildflower Center for their work. They're ensuring that Texas wildflowers will be as resplendent and plentiful in the future as they will be in coming weeks.

I hope you enjoy our Texas wildflowers this spring. If you stop on highway access lanes to enjoy the colorful landscapes, please be careful. And treat the plants with care and respect. They're part of what makes Texas a great place to live.

*Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column)*